Chapter 1

Science, Spectacle, and Storytelling

My only real purpose is to be smarter than the bad guys, to find the evidence that they did not know they left behind, and make sense of it all. (Grissom, 3.6, “The Execution of Catherine Willows”)¹

Near the end of a typical CSI episode, after being confronted with the details of their crime as reassembled by Grissom’s team, over-confident suspects will react with a mixture of admiration and incredulity. They are impressed with the criminalists’ ability to piece together the narrative of their crime, but fearful of its effect upon their legal guilt or innocence. “That’s a good story,” they tell the accusing investigator. This final, theatrical act of denial is a common trope of crime fiction, and CSI embraces it, as it does with so many other such generic trap-pings. Its crimes and investigations are, in fact, “good stories,” and even our skepticism as jaded TV viewers is insufficient to derail our enjoyment at the story told.

How does CSI do it? How does it work as a platform for mass audience storytelling, especially in an era when that very concept is increasingly dubious? It is certainly fair to say that CSI works because it is virtually note-perfect popular television drama, in the historical tradition, regularly delivering an accessible yet intriguing mix of mystery, education, and esprit de corps. It’s undeniably the product of a particularly baroque production style, largely courtesy of Jerry Bruckheimer, the producer who sought to bring his assertive big-screen bravado to television; Danny Cannon, the director who precisely set this tone in the first season; and a meticulous production
crew, who have materialized these values for over 200 episodes. It also comes from a well-honed television storytelling craft, from Anthony Zuiker, who conceived the series, and Carol Mendelsohn, Ann Donahue, Naren Shankar, and all the other writers (including former crime scene investigators Richard Catalani and Elizabeth Devine), who skillfully narrativize crime, science, spectacle, and professionalism in each episode. It’s also the result of consistently effective performances from regular cast members William Petersen, Marg Helgenberger, Jorja Fox, George Eads, Gary Dourdan, Eric Szmanda, Paul Guilfoyle, and many recurring and guest actors. All told, the series has deservedly established itself as one of the key formal and industrial paradigms in mainstream American television, circa 2000–10. However, CSI’s roots actually lie deeper, in the long, entwined histories of science, bureaucratic power, official justice, crime fiction, and media spectacle. The series is both classic and contemporary, coupling long-standing crime narrative tropes with state-of-the-art twenty-first century tools, techniques and visual storytelling. This chapter “follows the evidence” of CSI’s style, tracing how crime and investigation plots are conveyed through conspicuous spectacle, and how this formal commitment structures the series’ standard narrative formula.

Crime and Investigation

At the risk of opening with a banal observation, I’ll point out that the C in CSI stands for “crime.” While we most often take this term for granted, it is worth considering what “crime” means. Crimes are essentially cultural: actions or states of being deemed “deviant” and/or “dangerous,” and thus “criminalized,” that is, placed outside the boundaries of “normal” society, however that may be defined in particular contexts (and by particular forces, of which the sovereign State is only one). Crimes are therefore highly contingent. Actions deemed “criminal” (e.g., gambling) in one place may fall within the realm of normality in others (e.g., Las Vegas). As Michel Foucault points out in Discipline and Punish, the criminal justice system, as we typically regard it in the twenty-first century, is largely a product of
scientific, medical, and bureaucratic state powers that began to coalesce over 200 years ago. Thus, “criminal” activities and people are the purview of the government and its agents (including scientists of various stripes). That said, as the phrase “a crime of passion” neatly evokes, we also take for granted that crime also occurs on the scale of individual lives. To take an archetypal example, one person’s death at the hands of another is not only a public matter for the court: it is regarded as a violation of private trust.

Accordingly, with such public and private consequences indicated by its very definition, crime has long fueled the interest of outside observers. While there are many historical and mythical antecedents, this interest becomes particularly active alongside modernity, beginning in the eighteenth century, when accounts of prison confessions, detailing crimes in graphic detail, were first published in books and periodicals. These precursors, to what we today refer to as “true crime” narratives, indicate a strong relationship between crime, spectacle (even in the written word alone), narrative, and official and popular consumption. In other words, crime began to function as both a category of State power and mass entertainment. By the mid nineteenth century, fictional crime stories clearly inspired by these accounts began to be published, detailing not only crimes but also their investigations by interested or official authorities. As John Scaggs describes in his history of crime fiction, the “rational detective,” first seen in the Dupin stories of Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s, is a particularly modern character, schooled in the actions, objects and methods of post-Enlightenment civilization, and most often ensconced in its legal and moral codes, as well as its bureaucracy (2005: 33–49). Appearing in society virtually simultaneously with organized police departments, and replacing the clerical or royal decree of crime with intensive observation and logical deduction, detectives, even amateur or independent ones, were represented as agents of modernity in literature, solving crimes and reasserting the prevailing moral and social order, however contentious that may be.

Moreover, they did so increasingly through the new theories and tools of forensic science, including photography, fingerprinting, and even lie detectors: all modern technologies and methods ostensibly
designed to identify criminal individuals. As Ronald R. Thomas notes in his study of the concomitant rise of detective fiction and forensic criminology, the “detective narrative, in its deployment of these forensic technologies and in its resemblance to them, helped to make nineteenth-century persons legible for a modern technological culture” (1999: 17). This burgeoning “modern technological culture” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was defined by the new technologies and scientific methods of visibility. Technologies like photography, cinematography, and sound recording created new registers of spectacle, freezing in time and space moments – like Eadweard Muybridge’s famous 1878 photos of Leland Stanford’s galloping horse – that were once only fleeting, and disseminating mass-produced copies to far-flung viewers and listeners. Similarly, rapidly developing fields like biology, medicine, chemistry, and physics had begun to re-envision the world as a rational system of signs that could be made visible through increasingly precise scientific methods of experimentation and observation. By the beginning of the twentieth century, these practices, theories, and devices had redefined the world, down to the atom, as the realm of the visible.
Within a few decades, after a century of increasingly modern urban, bureaucratic, and scientifically-ordered life in the most developed countries, crime fiction, in many sub-genres, had become one of the primary forms of popular storytelling in literature, comics, film, drama, and radio. Detectives, empowered with modern tools and methods, and operating in the new scientific and legal regimes of the visible, imbued a more traditional moral certainty to an otherwise turbulent age. Unsurprisingly, the genre was readily adapted to television as early as the 1940s, its investigative narratives making an easy transition to the intimate, yet functionally civic properties of the new, domestic visual medium. There, as Jason Mittell has argued, the early critical and popular successes of *Dragnet* (1951–9), which stylistically drew from 1940s crime films and radio dramas, helped establish the generic template for TV crime drama, and in particular the police procedural (2004: 121–52). The genre has since become one of American television’s staples. As such, it has continued the technocratic pursuit of the visible “truth” of crime, and has functioned as a prime exemplar of television’s ideological construction of American society as a schizoid terrain of comfort and danger, where staid normality prevails, but “bad guys” also prey on “the innocent,” with only the “thin blue line” of the police (or, their occasional substitutes, such as the conscientious private eye or vigilant national security agent/spy) positioned in between.

However, unlike the eccentric sleuths of classic crime fiction like Dupin, Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, or even television’s own Columbo, who all practically work solo, displaying singular powers of perception, the investigators of *CSI*, like many (though not all) of their TV detective forebears, function as a team, grounding their actions firmly in the realm of State power and bureaucratic routine, complete with badges and insignia. Similarly, while the classic rational detectives solved small murders on their own, seemingly removed from the bulk of society (e.g., in archetypal country houses), the *CSI* team – supervising CSI Gil Grissom (William Petersen), senior CSI Catherine Willows (Marg Helgenberger), and junior CSIs Warrick Brown (Gary Dourdan), Greg Sanders (Eric Szmanda), Sara Sidle (Jorja Fox), and
Nick Stokes (George Eads) – engages directly with every level of the social order in southern Nevada, seeking to restore public justice and normality where it has been disrupted. Each investigation they are involved with is an official case under the authority of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. Thus, the law, rather than the investigators’ individual guile, ultimately determines their actions. Importantly, team members, including lab technicians and detectives, are also typically depicted as model public servants: selfless, reliable team players, with near-unimpeachable crime-solving skills (though also slightly flawed in certain ways that occasionally impede their abilities, as chapter 3 will examine). While individual egos may sometimes arise, investigations on CSI are always conceived of as a collective social action, serving a viable and official need: scientific expertise producing visible, criminal truth for the modern bureaucratic state.

As with most forms of crime fiction (with the notable exception of what Scaggs describes as the “crime thriller,” which is generally centered on the actions and psychology of the criminal, rather than the detective), and in keeping with its roots in nineteenth-century science, technology, and bureaucracy, television crime drama is still primarily premised on
the practice of investigation: that is, the generation and analysis of “evidence” which eventually links particular crimes to particular criminals. Protagonists in crime fiction must successfully gather and correctly study the available physical and psychological traces in order to apprehend the criminals. This is generally conveyed in a straightforward narrative formula, where the discovery of a crime leads immediately into its investigation, which only ends at the moment of revelation, when the criminals have been publicly revealed, and are arrested by the police or (less commonly) killed. The utility of this formula for series television, or for any media series, for that matter, is that it takes viewers (or readers, etc.) on a familiar, comfortable, ritualized narrative path. Each episode ostensibly functions like every other episode, with the same expectations and, ultimately, reassurances by the end. In these narrative worlds, while it’s clear that crime will always happen, the “proper authorities,” that is, those granted the requisite skills and/or official license, will (almost) always deal with it, and justice will (almost) always prevail. CSI unapologetically follows this classic formula, almost to the letter: crimes are discovered, evidence is investigated, and criminals are ultimately revealed.

It is important to note that “evidence” is both a scientific and legal category. In the laboratory, hypotheses are tested by observing experiments, that is, by producing measurable evidence. In the courtroom, guilt or innocence is proven, “beyond a reasonable doubt,” through the logical weighing of each side’s evidence. Ellen Burton Harrington points out that, in its veneration of evidence above all, CSI, as did Thomas’ earlier detective stories, reaffirms the standard ideology of evidence in the service of both science and law, and particularly its deployment in the nineteenth century to fix the identity of criminals (2007). While the specific tools and methods of criminal investigation have changed since then, this initial rationale remains. As Martha Gever states in her study of the use of digital surveillance on CSI, as in the classic ideology of detection, individuals are “perceptible only as the sum of inscriptions,” that is, the “evidence” ascribed to them (2005: 447). This unrelenting focus on the evidence as the engine of forensic science and criminal inscription drives CSI, down to its signature use of the Who’s “Who Are You?” as its theme song.
The emphasis on evidence draws CSI even more intently to the concept of spectacle. A spectacle, broadly speaking, is something to behold with all of one’s senses (not only visual), entrancing audiences with exciting sights, sounds, and other sensations. Critics have long considered visual and (more recently) audio spectacle to be a seminal component of the culture and industry of film, which emerged out of science and entertainment (e.g., the theater and the circus) at the turn of the twentieth century. As John Caldwell has argued, such conspicuous spectacle has also been a critical component in the functioning of television, as dominant industrial policy since the 1980s, and in its functioning since its inception (1995: 3–102). However, as the Marxist critic Guy Debord famously claimed, spectacle is also a key part of the fabric of contemporary society, “a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (1983: 7). As with the technocratic, intensely visible world produced by nineteenth- and twentieth-century science and bureaucracy, the very idea of spectacle structures our perceptions, presenting a normative expectation of arresting, or at least engaging, images and sounds. CSI narrates spectacle: from its darkness-piercing flashlights to its climactic confessions, its format is premised on processes of visibility, and its plots hinge on revelation. Accordingly, narrative and formal techniques of spectacle are both fully woven into the tasks of its characters (i.e., gathering and processing evidence), and conspicuously used in its production as fictional television (e.g., through the use of CGI, prosthetics, impressionistic editing, etc.).

**Showing and Telling**

Visibility is the primary component of television crime drama. While the crime itself might not have been seen in the narrative by anyone except the criminal and victims, its investigation is, by contrast, highly visible, and is focused on producing visibility, that is, revealing the intimate details of the crime. As both a narrative world and a television drama, CSI, as suggested by its full title – Crime Scene Investigation – is saturated with such visibility, which, as with spectacle in general, includes not only visual information, but may also involve the four
other senses. On CSI, as with any film or television program, only sight and sound are actually present, but they can be effectively manipulated to suggest other senses, as when characters react to the putrid smell of a rotting corpse, for example (as seen in 3.18, 4.2, 5.3, 6.1, and others). Whether through performance, cinematography, editing, sound, or visual effects, CSI produces a wide range of visible events, objects, and people. Visibility leads the police and criminalists to crime scenes, propels their investigations, and ultimately confirms or denies their suspicions. Most importantly, it also shapes our perceptions of narrative events, and propels narrative enigmas: what lies behind the secret door? Whose decapitated head is in the helmet? What caused that bruising? In CSI, visibility comes in many forms and through many sources, both complementary, as with ballistics testing that confirms that a particular gun was fired, and contradictory, when witnesses recall different versions of an event. It ranges in scope from demolished buildings to DNA. Moreover, it is quite often initially invisible, as with blood traces on a bathroom sink, or a few hairs on a car seat.

At the level of narrative action, however, and as a prominent manifestation of popular broadcast television in the early twenty-first century, CSI is more concerned with the implications of the concept of visibility, and of particular acts and practices of visibility, than with what is ultimately “revealed.” In other words, it is the technologies of visibility, and the skills of the investigators (as well as the series’ production personnel), rather than the resolution of crimes that legitimates viewer interest. Thus, the process, rather than the outcome, of investigation, is CSI’s raison d’être. Martha Gever argues that “the locus of truth in CSI resides in expert applications of scientific technologies that organize and produce inscriptions, without troubling with problems of interpretation” (2005: 456). The same might be said of the production of CSI as a television show: impressive spectacle is meticulously and skillfully assembled, and left at that. Technologies of inscription, whether DNA analysis databases, mass spectrometers, film cameras, or post-production suites, produce the spectacular “truths” that drive CSI.

As the criminalists – Grissom in particular – state throughout the series, evidence – both the physical material gathered, described, and
displayed in multiple and intricate ways throughout every episode, and the narrative material of witnesses – is key. Accordingly, visibility in CSI, centered on the idea of evidence, is structured around showing and telling: traces of criminal activity both conspicuously displayed and conspicuously described. While we rarely witness – in narrative chronology, at least – the actual incidents that propel each episode’s investigations, we perceive them repeatedly through reassembled traces with each new piece of evidence. Similarly, while we see a great deal of evidence gathering and processing (in extensive and elaborate montage sequences; see below), we are often only told the results of these tasks, as, for example, lab tech David Hodges hands CSI Nick Stokes a piece of paper with the results of paint chip tests and tells him the make, model, and year of the car they are seeking. At other moments, however, we are both shown and told a great deal about the phenomena or event under examination. This is most commonly seen in Doc Robbins’ autopsy scenes, as he explains and indicates the victims’ causes of death in graphic detail. Bodies are displayed (inside and out), probed, dissected, and described in this manner in nearly every episode. As Robbins describes the cause of death, the camera zooms into the body, and Robbins’ explanation is re-enacted with prosthetics and/or CGI effects: tissue is punctured, bones are crunched, lungs are drowned, spines are severed, and so on. We, alongside the investigating criminalist (usually Grissom in these scenes), are thus elegantly made to understand exactly what happened to kill the victim – that is, the cause of death, or “COD” in CSI-speak – in a couple of minutes of screen time, with little hesitation or uncertainty.

As these autopsies also indicate, showing and telling on CSI is not only about exposition or plot resolution, however, as every episode also features several moments and even entire scenes that function more precisely as pedagogy, that is, as classic visual-verbal teaching. Information is not merely presented: it is rendered spectacular, and reinforced by the narrative. Whether describing bruising patterns, tool marks, bullet velocities, toxicity of poisons, blood spatter range, conduction of electricity, properties of digital video, blackjack betting, the physical strength of a horse’s front legs, or any other obvious or arcane subject, CSI constantly teaches us about its world. The question
of whether or not the content of such instruction is actually valid outside the series is significant (as chapter 4 will examine), but ultimately beside the point. In its dazzling immediate application, it works: we are effectively “educated” by these moments, at least as far as the narrative requires us to be. John Hartley argues that television, as a domestic, public, centralized audiovisual medium, can be extremely effective in such pedagogical moments, enough so that “teaching” should be considered the medium’s primary function. “[Television]’s not just a teacher, it’s a good one” (1999: 32).

The series’ emphasis on the production of visibility, coupled with this earnest pedagogy, and an excessively aestheticized mise-en-scène function together to produce a heightened verisimilitude, whereby conspicuous spectacle enhances audiovisual appeal (i.e., the series’ renowned “ear” and “eye candy”), propels the narrative, and even stakes some claims for technical accuracy. Although such a mix of stylized excess and functional realism may seem dubious or even irresponsible to some viewers wedded to traditional conceptions of television realism, it’s perfectly consonant with the dominant stylistic sensibility of American television drama in the 2000s. Accordingly, CSI easily and engagingly functions in an almost theatrical style, pushing just past the normative edges of television realism. Colors are slightly oversaturated, spaces are generally expressionistically lit, cameras seemingly float and glide, editing is conspicuous, and even performances are just a bit broader than prime-time dramatic norms. By extending the presentation of concepts, objects, or practices beyond the norms of conventional television realism, even as depicted in crime drama, CSI ratchets up viewers’ potential aesthetic, emotional and rational investments. While some critics may value a more austere (though ultimately no less stylized; “austerity” itself being a style) approach to crime narrative, CSI’s “excessive” style, far from being a narrative hindrance, is appropriate to twenty-first century media culture, and particularly to dramatic television. In a fast-paced, screen-centered media age when cutting-edge CGI regularly illustrates news and documentary programming, and nearly 2 billion people routinely use the multiple-layered systems of representation on mobile phones, web browsers, and other platforms, mediated
information normatively circulates in many ways. Thus, despite stylistic choices that seem “unrealistic” (e.g., slow motion, conspicuous post-processing, tangential effects sequences, perpetually shadowy lighting, dubious investigative technology, etc.), CSI can still effectively claim to be grounded in “real” twenty-first-century media culture. In his extended analysis of 4.8, Cohan argues that the series’ meticulous visual style reflects its narrative ideology of visibility, exploring “the tension inherent in CSI’s fascination with looking at and through science” (2008: 86). As chapter 4 will show, this dominant sensibility, bolstered by promotional materials like cast and crew interviews and DVD behind-the-scenes features, has even allegedly fostered real effects on the expectations of actual forensic science technologies and practices.

CSI’s signature gratuitous treatments of evidence are thus essential in its pursuit of heightened verisimilitude. The conventionally-visible world of people, objects and places in television crime drama – the usual eyewitness statements, gunshot wounds, fingerprints and confessions – is made even more visible on the series, stylized well past the boundaries of traditional generic realism. In addition, otherwise invisible realms – most notably, the interior of the human body – are routinely made visible in the series’ signature “CSI shots,” as the camera seemingly swoops down through impossibly small holes or even penetrates walls in order to see what lies beneath the surface. This visibility extends to the microscopic worlds of molecules, striations, alleles and the like, which are brought into sight with the cutting-edge imaging and analysis technology of forensic pathology, chemical trace analysis, ballistics, and, most significantly, DNA analysis. Data gleaned from this laboratory analysis is then typically searched in the narrative against nationally- and globally-networked databases such as AFIS (the Automated Fingerprint Identification System), CODIS (the Combined DNA Index System), and IBIS (the Interagency Border Inspection System), which are all presented not so much as resources but as gleaming, state-of-the-art Truth Machines, as all-knowable as the fictional future computers of the Star Trek universe.4

This gratuitous spectacle extends as well to the evidence of witness and suspect statements and investigators’ speculations, which are not
only told (verbally) but also shown in brief audiovisual sequences. Typically, these scenes go even further stylistically, discarding all the usual codes of realism in favor of more visceral and ambiguous regimes of light, color, motion, texture, and sound. For example, in 3.7, the “bullet time” effect (“freezing” action into three-dimensional space, also seen prominently in the flashforward of the lab shootout that opens 10.1) is used to speculate about a particular punch in a high-stakes boxing match. In 6.4, the prime suspect’s version of her experiences in the UFO cult, and with its leader, is rendered in a distorted, nightmarish montage sequence. By equating evidence with spectacle in this manner, CSI treads a clear visual narrative path, with all made exciting, and nothing significant left unexplored or unexplained. As Karen Lury notes, this rendering of data into spectacle and back into data is one of the series’ hallmark practices. “The tension between the power of the image and the power over the image is . . . the continual tease of this programme.” (2005: 50). I would add to this that this “tension” persists at the meta-level as well, in the self-conscious production and promotion of CSI. In other words, this “image-power” is as much about CSI as popular television as it is the fictional CSIs on the series.

However intoxicating its spectacles, since CSI is ostensibly concerned with science, its pedagogical remit would not function without its protagonists’ expository dialogue that teaches viewers what it all means. What is the significance of a particular insect on a decomposing body? What is the effect of this chemical on lung tissue? How do organized gamblers illegally affect the betting line on an upcoming basketball game? Most of us are not experts on most of what arises in the series’ investigations; whether or not it is entirely accurate is irrelevant, as we have to accept it, and the CSIs’ credibility, for the sake of the narrative. Telling, in this direct manner, is another factor that separates CSI from standard crime dramas. Again, it’s the ideology of visibility, of the very production of “truth,” that’s more critical than whatever “truth” is ultimately presented. CSI justifies all this conspicuous explanation by making its protagonists teachers and students engaging in on-the-job training; we learn alongside them. The lower-ranked criminalists (Warrick Brown, Greg Sanders, Sara Sidle, and
Nick Stokes, for most of the series’ run; Ronnie Lake, Riley Adams and Raymond Langston more recently) must consistently display their expertise and prowess to their supervisors (Gil Grissom and Catherine Willows) in order to maintain, and potentially advance, their careers. Grissom chides Sara and Nick for not knowing what “murder central” (the room nearest the stairs in a hotel) is in 2.11. In 5.1, the fact that Grissom calls out Greg’s sloppiness in the investigation of the nightclub shooting serves as an important pedagogical moment for Greg, and for us; Grissom’s authority is reaffirmed, as are our expectations of the team’s (and thus the series’) credibility. In the second half of season nine, Ray Langston must quickly come up to speed as a rookie CSI, and endures many such teaching moments in the field.

Importantly, however, these teacher-student roles are also not fixed. While Grissom is clearly the most professorial figure of the series, all the main characters display their expertise as the situation demands, as with Greg’s often salacious (and quite possibly apocryphal) experiences in the Vegas club scene, Nick’s fascination with vehicles and extreme sports, Warrick’s deep knowledge of gambling, or Catherine’s background as an exotic dancer. The series typically reinforces these explanations, which might otherwise seem highly tangential, through additional stylized audio-visual exposition, as in Doc Robbins’ explanation of chakras in 2.17, Grissom’s explanation of a roulette scam in 4.22, or Nick’s elaborate courtroom reconstruction of Greg’s actions at the scene of a near-fatal beating in the latter’s coroner’s inquest in 7.7.

Given that much of CSI’s investigations take the criminalists – and us – into worlds outside television’s normative representations, these show-and-tell moments, justified primarily by the team’s insatiable curiosity and stoic acceptance of almost all they encounter, and fueled by the series’ signature conspicuous spectacle, aid our understanding while avoiding much of the moralizing generally typical of the crime genre. Both criminalists and viewers are encouraged to suspend their judgments of many depicted actions and practices, and instead, in classic scientific fashion, open their minds to broader possibilities. While much of these more subcultural scenes and storylines work in tandem with the depiction of Las Vegas as a kind of “anything goes” Sin City (as examined in chapter 2), they also function to
bolster the team’s standing as both scientists and cosmopolitans (at least within the borders of 2000s popular broadcast television). In other words, while some team members may react with surprise or even mild disgust at particular practices they encounter, they almost always move quickly on to acceptance, reinforcing their objectivity and their sophisticated sensibilities. As Cohan argues, in these plots and scenes “a continuing interrogation of normalcy turns the ethical compass of CSI” (2008: 123). For example, myriad sexual fetishes and subcultures are depicted in the series, their basic codes and rules explained to viewers in as explicit terms as prime time network television generally allows. Several episodes focus on BDSM, with the recurring dominatrix character of Lady Heather serving as the team’s guide to this world. While some of these subcultures are met with some ridicule and/or skepticism from the regulars, Grissom, as moral and intellectual center, is generally insistent that people and practices be understood on their own terms. In 4.5, during an investigation of a murder at a “furries and plushies” convention, Grissom, citing Freud, notes that “the only unnatural sexual behavior is to have none at all.” In addition to sexual subcultures, the series also regularly delves into other non-mainstream worlds, giving them similarly extensive pedagogical treatments (again, within the conceptual confines of prime-time network television), including magic (3.5), haute cuisine (3.11, 8.2), Buddhism (2.17), and norteño narcocorrido music (5.12), as well as the even more esoteric realms of vampires (4.13), UFO cults (6.4, 7.22), murder groupies (3.22), and robot fighting (3.18).

**Following the Evidence**

As effective popular television, CSI is deceptively simple yet compelling. Throughout the series, Grissom often reminds his team to “follow the evidence.” This directive, while narratively significant to them both in the moment and cumulatively, is also taken to heart by viewers. Individual episodes teach us how to read the series’ presentation of “evidence”; additional episodes reward this lesson by conforming to our expectations. In principle, this is not only effective television storytelling; it
is also effective science. While our materials are slickly-produced television episodes, as opposed to spattered blood drops or mysterious fibers, we share the criminalists’ research methods, following the available evidence to solve the narratives/crimes in each episode.

Most episodes of *CSI* follow a straightforward narrative formula common to popular fiction, and particularly to popular television: an initial stasis is broken by an event that compels the protagonists to restore the social order. This circular form, common across many television genres, allows characters and settings to continue over time more-or-less unchanged by any particular event. For this reason, it is generally referred to as *episodic narrative*; each cycle of stasis-rupture-stasis conveying a distinct segment in the characters’ lives, and an individual, almost interchangeable, portion of the series as a whole. By contrast, *serial narratives* consist of ongoing events told over many episodes, keeping events and characters’ lives in flux. Episodes of serialized programs must therefore be viewed in a particular sequence in order to work; most American prime-time dramas since the 1980s have functioned in this manner. *CSI* straddles these forms by foregrounding the particularities of the cases at hand in each episode, while simultaneously, and more subtly, advancing serial storylines that may unfold across several episodes or even over several years.

Since they are premised on representing the process of problem-investigation-solution, procedural dramas like *CSI* utilize an episodic narrative style much more often than more serialized programs. Thus, the plots of most *CSI* episodes unfold similarly, in a standard narrative structure that explicitly foregrounds the process of investigation as a routine and methodical set of tasks carried out by knowledgeable and conscientious professionals. The particular narrative balance of *CSI*, tilted heavily in favor of episodic instead of serial storytelling, functions most pragmatically to provide an accessible format for a wide array of viewers. In every episode, casual viewers can get a complete crime-solving narrative delivered in less than an hour, while more loyal viewers can enjoy part of a much longer, subtler narrative exploring the challenges of working adulthood. This consistency, always coherently and engagingly conveyed, may arguably explain why *CSI* has been a top-rated series for virtually its entire
run. It has never fallen out of the top 10, and has almost always finished in the top five most-watched regular series, regularly beaten out (in its first nine seasons) only by Fox’s American Idol (2002–), ABC’s Dancing With The Stars (2005–), and, occasionally, ABC’s Grey’s Anatomy (2005–).

While both episodic and serial form is essential to understanding how CSI works, the former is the primary concern here; chapter 3 will address the latter. The remainder of this chapter will analyze the three segments of CSI’s standard narrative – Discovery, Investigation, and Revelation – with an emphasis on how the extensive show-and-tell visibility described above shapes each.

Discovery

The purpose of most episodes’ brief opening sequence is to locate us in the moment of discovery, when the stasis of “normal life” in Las Vegas is broken by the perception of crime. Usually, though not always, this sequence is set at nighttime, suggesting night as the normative setting of our narratives. Night is a critical component in the series’ depiction of Las Vegas as “Sin City” (as discussed more fully in the next chapter), but is also justified in the narrative, as Grissom’s team generally works the night shift at the crime lab. More suggestively, night also conforms to the aesthetic and genre expectations of detective and suspense fiction, suggesting greater danger and mystery, and providing more opportunities for the production of visibility (e.g., in the ubiquitous form of flashlights illuminating the darkness). However, crime does not always work on the clock. Thus, to the series’ credit, it also regularly explores the different possibilities of daytime crime scenes, when the veneer of everyday life is arguably more vulnerable, and the eruption of crime seemingly more distressing. The body buried in the park playground in 2.21, the car crashing into a crowded bistro in 3.17, and the deadly chase and shootout in 6.7 all show how violence, or the discovery of its traces in the form of dead bodies, can shatter the comfort of everyday life.

Regardless of the cases in the episode, the initial stasis at the opening of each episode is most often conveyed in a series of aerial shots of
the Strip, Las Vegas’ spectacular hub of hotels, casinos, and entertainment. A thunderous burst of sound marks the appearance of Vegas’ gaudy buildings, as the camera floats over shots of the Strip, usually accompanied by the suggestive sounds of traffic, people, and the muted pinging of slot machines. On occasion, a song is used instead in these sequences to propel us into a particular sensibility, with shots of the Strip augmented or replaced by a thematic montage sequence (usually featuring one of that episode’s victims). Particularly evocative examples of this approach include Prodigy’s noisy “Spitfire” over scenes of Sin City in full effect in 5.1, Gary Jules’ quiet lamentation “Mad World” with the slow-motion and split-screen comparison of a wealthy young playboy and a despondent laundry worker in 6.2, Frank Sinatra’s version of “Almost Like Being In Love” over stock footage of “old Vegas” in 6.13, and, in 7.12, the Velvet Underground’s classic “Sweet Jane,” underscoring an elliptical montage of doomed young women arriving at the same Las Vegas bus station in 1975, 1989, 1999 and 2007. Such music-centered montage openings locate us not only geographically but emotionally, framing the visuals and setting us up for the remainder of the episode.

Recalling Alfred Hitchcock’s famous opening shots of Psycho (1960), the visual perspective then typically moves in closer, in a combination of camera movement, editing, and visual effects, taking the viewer to a precise location where a crime is about to be perpetrated or discovered. Our consistent omniscient view of the narrative tableau (i.e., metropolitan Las Vegas) is reinforced this way in nearly every episode. We are given virtually universal visual access, as Vegas itself is fully revealed to us, moving through walls, buildings, and other obstacles as need be. The stylized production of visibility is thus presented from the very beginning of every episode. Most often the ultimate destination of this movement is a particular building or neighborhood, but it may also be in the desert or mountains surrounding the city. Eventually, we are close enough to observe people either caught up in deadly action, or, more commonly, stumbling upon the outcome of a seeming crime, such as a dead body or, not uncommonly, part of one (i.e., a severed and/or decomposed body part). Often the series plays with the expectations of both crime fiction and its own form by
opening with potentially dangerous situations that are actually red herrings (i.e., narrative feints) that are suddenly derailed by the discovery of the real crime. For example, in 2.11, a seemingly imminent date rape in a late-night hotel lobby is cut off when the couple discovers an unconscious body in an elevator. In 6.17, a drunken woman stumbling from her car to her condo door is startled by a screaming and bloodied naked woman running down the hall. In 5.18, in a bit of double misdirection, a man on a wooded hillside at night at first appears to be a sniper setting up a hit, but is then revealed to be an amateur astronomer, who then gets caught in a sudden fireball rolling through the trees.

However, on rare occasions, the open may be in media res – that is, with the team already present on an investigation – or on a seemingly inexplicable scene, such as the courtroom open of 4.7, with Warrick on the stand; the Seinfeld-inspired diner breakfast in 6.21, as Greg, Nick and Sara philosophize about breakfasts and weddings; and the lab under attack in 10.1. On these occasions, the stasis is shifted back or forwards in story time, and we are forced to begin to piece together the events that brought the regular characters to that point. In the open of 4.12, for example, the suspense builds as a person slowly tracking through a darkened house is revealed to be Grissom already at a crime scene, whose initial reaction to the murder victim – a woman who bears an uncanny resemblance to Sara – is a critical plot point to the episode.

As soon as the discovery is made, the location is rendered a “crime scene” by the narrative and the action usually immediately cuts to a point after the police have arrived. They have already cordoned off the area – the “scene” is set, with the signature yellow tape marking its boundaries. The CSI team arrives, and their investigation begins.

Investigation
The term “crime scene” is especially apt for television drama, as the dramatic tableau of the case is defined, or at least initiated, by what is physically found (and thus, potentially visible) at that location.
Investigations are the primary narrative action of the series, and typically take up 30 minutes of every 43-minute episode. However, since this is CSI, and not Columbo, or Dragnet, or even Law & Order, investigation is conspicuously rooted in scientific (or at least pseudo-scientific) principles, methods, and technologies. The series boldly states that physical evidence is all, and this focus justifies both the series’ production of spectacle and its pedagogy: seeing really is believing. Appropriately, a great deal of the drama in the series is typically conveyed by medium and close-up shots of the team members looking. We watch their gazes, deciphering concentration in their furrowed brows and pursed lips. Importantly, we often do not immediately realize exactly what they are looking at or for. The sense conveyed by their focused actions (intense examinations of floors and walls, methodical usage of flashlights, painstaking searches through trash bags, squinting, etc.) is that they’ll know what’s important when they find it. When they do find something important, the camera, following their gaze, often cuts or zooms in to one of the series’ signatures, a “CSI shot”: an extreme close-up of a drop of blood, a single hair, a button, etc. Again, the critical narrative factor here is the production
of visibility. All the objects the CSIs accumulate and record at the crime scene – bone fragments, shell casings, carpet fibers, diaries, and so on – become “evidence” by the very act of their gathering. Even the victims’ time-of-death (aka “TOD”), routinely determined by assistant coroner David Phillips’ thermometer at the scene, is immediately recorded and entered into evidence.

Importantly, beyond their eyes, ears, noses, hands, and occasionally tongues, the CSIs conspicuously use a wide variety of tools to extract evidence in the field, much of which would be otherwise invisible to immediate human perception. These tools are deployed in spectacular sequences that emphasize, and even eroticize, visibility even further, beyond normal human perception. Blood is magically made to appear on otherwise innocuous-looking surfaces and objects by a few sprays of phenolphthalein solution, which turns pink on contact. Semen – the second most-prevalent bodily fluid on the series – glows blue on examined sheets and clothing seen under ultraviolet (UV) light. Shoeprints are lifted intact onto static-charged plastic sheets. Fibers, scraps of cloth, paint flecks, and other miniscule bits of material are carefully bagged and collected. Photographs are taken from every angle, and surveillance tapes examined. Odors are even “recorded” as evidence, as with the incriminating perfume in 2.4. The series’ pedagogical function, and full scope of show-and-tell, comes to the fore in the midst of all this observing, gathering and measuring. In these dazzling sequences, the scientific method is not only a means to plot ends; it is made to perform. In the past, and in other current crime series, these sorts of narrative actions would take place in ellipsis, almost entirely off-screen. The results of laboratory tests would be hastily passed on to police detectives, who would be our primary narrative agents. On CSI, by contrast, the very process of investigation is the key point of the show. Thus, actions that would be mundane, tedious and likely exhausting in real life (e.g., field searches, autopsies, lab experiments), or rendered off-screen, are instead showcased: conveyed in alluring, tightly choreographed and edited sequences. In 2.18, Sara and Warrick’s grueling search down the highway for evidence linked to the bus crash becomes a deep-focus, dissolution-laden testament to their capabilities and diligence. In 7.20, Hodges’ fascination with one of the serial killer’s miniatures is represented by figuratively shrinking him down to its size, and following his search
Investigation: Sara and Warrick piece together the chain of events in a road accident, in 2.18 “Chasing The Bus.”

Investigation: Warrick attempts to match a blown-up film image of the Stratosphere Tower to the view from a dilapidated hotel room, in order to find the scene of the crime, in 3.8 “Snuff.”

within that space. In 3.8, the team’s methodical search for the hotel room where the snuff film was shot (based on a brief view of the Stratosphere Tower in a few frames of film) is conveyed through a long montage sequence taking them through many different rooms.
While these sequences rarely feature dialogue, music is a particularly important factor in them, and usually comes in the form of moody songs selected by music supervisor Jason Alexander. Citing his pursuit of music that has “a more organic and meandering feel to it,” Alexander claims that he and the producers have “always tried to have a musical marriage between the cool exciting things they do in their job and what they’re doing in their lab. Music is often with them on a journey of discovery, where they’re finding things out” (White, 2008: 78). Typical songs in these sequences are rhythmic, mid-tempo tracks that generally fall in the broad category of “chill” music, from artists including Lamb, Radiohead, Sigur Ros, and Tosca. The resulting emotional tone is contemplative, yet active, reinforcing the sequences’ shots of methodical, demanding investigation. Such work is thus made serious yet sexy: done by attractive people, in interesting settings, with cool music.

Production design is a particularly important component of the investigation portion of episodes, reinforcing the series’ heightened verisimilitude. While all the other spaces on the series are similarly “enhanced” visually in a standard way (deep depth of field, moody lighting, slightly saturated colors), the spaces of the Las Vegas Police Department – several labs, the autopsy room, a break room, Grissom’s office, the interrogation room, and a few hallways – are the only standing sets on the series, and effectively serve as CSI’s primary dramatic tableaux. Visibility is foregrounded in the design of this space. Most of the walls shown in the station consist of large windows, some of them even floor-to-ceiling. This makes almost every room virtually transparent, or at least potentially transparent (blinds are sometimes partially or fully drawn), open to others’ surveillance. The station is thus presented as an “open” space, with seemingly very few closed doors and secrets, where people freely enter and exit rooms, and discuss cases in the hall. Although contrary to our expectations of such centers of social authority, this design renders it an idealized space for positive perceptions of such a powerful social institution: literally “transparent,” its inhabitants visually laboring on processing the evidence and thus serving justice. Information is even typically shared in these spaces, and people interact in a fairly open manner.
However, within this general design, there are a few exceptions: rooms of limited access, limited visibility, as well as the inevitable barriers and hoops of modern bureaucracies. The autopsy room is the primary room in this category. Unlike almost every other space in the station, it is very much a closed space, with small windows only in its doors. Here, under a clearly impractical but suitably expressionistic lighting scheme, bodies are cleaned, examined, and (if need be) taken apart in autopsies performed by Dr. Albert “Doc” Robbins, and his assistant David Phillips, and observed variously by Grissom and others. In these scenes, the body itself is reconfigured as evidence, literally taken apart with scalpels, saws and other tools, as well as figuratively dismantled via editing and special effects. Robbins is the primary storyteller in this space (he is rarely seen anywhere else), and his autopsies are the final word on the victim’s cause of death, vividly depicting the effects of, for example, a wooden stake through the head (3.16), a brutal beating (4.18), or, in the morbidly comic 7.21, a conjunction of multiple, unlikely injuries including faked snake bites, an allergic reaction to shrimp, and a perforated trachea.
SCIENCE, SPECTACLE, AND STORYTELLING

While the labs are the domain of physical science, the interrogation room, a more standard part of TV crime drama, is the stage for the ultimate psychological drama of accusation, denial, and eventual resolution (whether as confession or submission). “The box” on Homicide: Life on the Street (NBC, 1993–9) is arguably the genre’s most stylized incarnation, but CSI’s room takes on a similar prominence in its narratives. Like most spaces in the LVPD station, the room is visible to external scrutiny, with windows to the hall as well as the standard one-way glass to the adjoining observation room. It is also the primary domain of the series’ most prominent police officer, Detective Jim Brass. While the criminalists work on evidence gathered in the field and processed in the labs through microscopes, computers, and chemicals, Brass, as a typical TV cop, works directly on people, with his eyes and his voice. However, the general emphasis on spectacle persists in these scenes: it is Brass’ observations of the suspects’ reactions to his provocations that determine his course of action in the interrogations. Typically, Brass goes straight to the suspects’ insecurities, often humiliating them by insinuating their guilt or mocking their attempted alibis with a sardonic “Yeah, sure. I understand.” Brass is also often

The autopsy room: Grissom and Doc Robbins diagnose the cause of death (COD), in 3.21 “Forever.”
accompanied in the room by one or more CSIs, who produce and describe incriminating evidence, backing up his fiery accusations with the trump card of science.

However, this is still a show in which scientists are the heroes, and the detectives are secondary. Accordingly, and controversially, in a clean break with established police procedure, the CSIs are often the ones driving the questions both in the field and in the interrogation room, their scientific authority adding weight to the moral outrage they can express as accusers. In these scenes, the criminalists’ particular personality traits come to the fore, after having been suppressed during their investigations. Sara’s seething rage at cruelty, Catherine’s disgust at negligent parents, and Nick’s sympathetic demeanor all typically emerge when confronting criminals. In stark contrast, Grissom typically treats each such exchange as an intellectual encounter, coolly probing serial killers in 2.13, 5.6 and 7.24, and patiently prodding answers from the cannibalistic fitness devotee in 1.21, the murderous teen science whiz in 3.17, the lonely physician in 4.12 (an otherwise kindred soul), and the apologetic former sex offender in 7.6.
Revelation

The investigation comes to a head once all the seeming pieces of evidence point only to one possible cause. At that point, the stage is set for the final confrontation with the primary suspect(s), and the ultimate revelation of their guilt. While this is often a heavily-fraught and ambivalent moment in reality (since evidence rarely points as cleanly and directly to one guilty party), on *CSI* it is clearly a culminating moment, as the criminalists detail the evidence, and suspects realize they’ve been caught. Once formally confronted with these crucial bits of evidence, suspects are then usually formally arrested, though all subsequent events (arraignment, trial, sentencing, etc.) are almost never referred to in the narrative. The crime lab’s job is to gather and process enough evidence to convince the Clark County DA’s office to press criminal charges; what happens at that point is beyond their control, and beyond the narrative interest of the series. All that matters narratively is that the evidence is pinned to particular suspects, and they are revealed as the killers. However, on rare occasions, as in 2.2, 3.6, 4.12, and most of the season seven “Miniature Killer” storyline, the team’s investigations do not produce enough evidence to press any charges, leaving the crimes, and their social disruptions, unresolved.

Getting to that precise point, culminating the long investigation with a confession or certain arraignment, is inevitably represented in a tense scene, that almost always takes place in the interrogation room. The team walks the suspects, usually with their lawyers present, through the evidence, particularly indicating elements that were difficult to prove. This admission reinforces their credibility as investigators, essentially saying to the suspect “you might have had us there, but we found you out anyway.” Typically this scene is the dramatic high point of each episode, the one moment where our protagonists face off openly with proven (by their standards, at least) criminals. This is another convention taken completely from classic detective fiction, and particularly the novels of Agatha Christie, as the sleuth tells how they solved the mystery and identifies the killer. Their reactions to the criminal’s realizations that they have been caught are meant to mirror ours’; we are disgusted at the killers, but pleased that they have been apprehended.
Some revelation scenes offer a different spin on this moment, however, “revealing” matters more compelling than just the identity of the killer. For example, Ashley, the teen girl in 4.10, shocks Sara with her admission that she used a phony rape allegation to lure conspirators to the murder of a teen boy for only a few hundred dollars, and her confidence of her acquittal because she “dresses up real nice. Couple barettes, little lace collar, two dead parents. I’ll be the saddest little girl in the world.” Similarly, in 2.20, even Grissom is rendered speechless following the confession from two young girls that they killed the neighborhood “cat lady” only because they wanted one of her cats. In 1.9, the team reacts with dismay upon learning that none of the people they’d proven responsible for the death of a belligerent airplane passenger will be prosecuted.

Gathering the Evidence

*CSI* episodes routinely trace this narrative path, establishing crimes, following investigations, and revealing criminals with verve and panache. They consistently deliver just what they set out to do, and keep us transfixed by spectacular science and the time-honored traditions of detective fiction. The scene of their crimes, Las Vegas, is a critical component of the series’ success in this regard, and its multiple incarnations on *CSI* are the subject of the next chapter.